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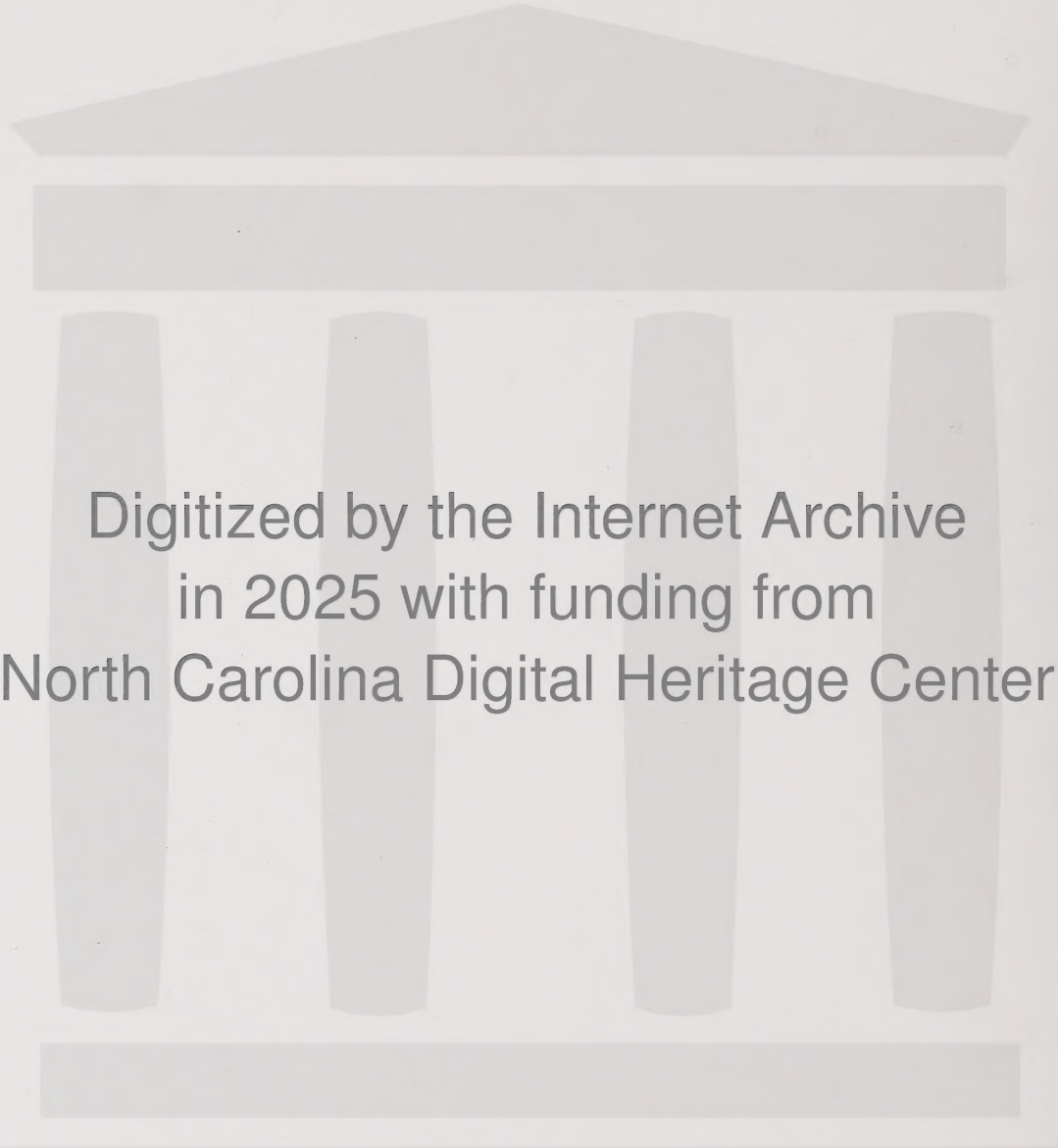
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Zen Succulents

Michelle Porizkova

Prism

William Peace University
Literary Magazine

2022

Phantom
Kyana Ayscue

Prism Staff

Dezarae Churchill

Kyra Harrison

Jasanee Killins

Tori Suhre

Angel Sutton

Faculty Advisor

Eliza Laskowski

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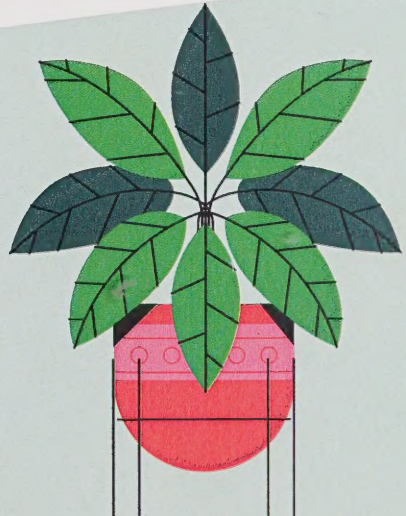

Génos

Sunne King

An encompassing canvas,
a story untold,
laying at the edge of eager fingertips.
What masterpiece is in mind?
What patrons await?
The exhibits are opening soon,
the testaments to one.
A creator singular, created bountiful–
what celestial bodies make you?
The audience implores,
seeking the fruits of Babylon,
the creatures of the wood,
the entities unearthly,
the essence of you.

Bare your tidings, bare your likings
upon a spirited self.
Colors unseen, sculptures unshaped,
all at the disposal of an artist unchanged.
It begins with the mind,
and then the soul,
then the heart casting it aflame.
Magic of the self speaks true,
it howls at dusk and bellows into dawn.
Each unfettered from time,
Each a part yet altogether in stance.
Bursting, shattering, flowing, gleaming,
into the makings of you.

Golden Eyed, Ender Fly
Emmarose Boylan

Snowflake

Tori Suhre

Through a silver-powdered wood
Of early January snow,
I chased that fleeting feeling
On the chilled winds that blow.
O! precious snowflake,
Your fragmented reflections
That too easily may break
And shatter your complexions.
The paragon of God's brilliant design
Composed of white crystal and delicate ice
Like a broken diamond that glitters and shines
Further glorifying your frigid device.
But when I held you in my grasp,
Like lorn lovers saying goodbye,
That winter had become your last,
As your remains began to dry.

Adjournment

Dezarae Churchill

Wildflowers bloom easily from the heat
radiating from within me.
Rain trickles slowly to quench my thirst
and encourage growth.
My heart is a wildfire, rampantly raging,
directions unknown.
An obsolete version of slash and burn
agriculture.

The damp summer air will soon retreat to
the dangers of autumn.
The nights will shorten, but the moon will
dangle closer to our touch.
Illuminating the path before me, stripped
of worldly cloaks, and braided slippers.
My toes caress the dark soil, the smell of
cinder fills my nose.

Wide eyes, welcoming only the moon's soft
hues.
Blinded by misconception, struggling to
find alignment.
Holes in the ground, screaming to be filled.
A blatant reflection of the frailty of vitality.

Year of the Tiger

Jacob Trump

The Garden of Eve

Sunne King

"Lord, what did I do to deserve this?" Zion asked themself, pushing through the reeds of the marshland. They learned long ago that staying out of Pops' busi-ness was in their best interest. Regard-less, that didn't stop their father from making Zion embark on this trek with yet another one of the eccentric old fool's mistakes: their sister.

"Hey, wait up!" Eve cried out, trudging behind Zion. Like any other child, she was so caught up in her surroundings that she didn't bother to follow closely.

Zion didn't answer.

Instead, they pressed forward into the glades as Eve made her eager pursuit.

They wanted nothing to do with her. That much was evident in their silence. At times, Zion did consider whether or not it was fair to treat a young girl so coldly. Eve hadn't been on this Earth long; if anything, it would make more sense for Zion to give her the benefit of the doubt. Yet every time they turned to look at her, all they felt was disgust. A child was somewhere in there, that they would admit. Still, nothing could shake Zion's conscience on the matter.

Eve was different. Worst of all, she knew it too.

From the way she carried herself to the way Zion acted around her, the unfortunate circumstance of her existence had disturbed both of them. Despite this grievance, neither made an effort to address it.

"Eve?" Zion called. They had realized the echo of footsteps behind them fell silent. "Eve, where are you?"

Their tone rose to a sharp, demanding pitch. Despite their distaste for the child, Zion didn't see that as an excuse to neglect their duties. "Eve, come here now!"

Nothing.

"Eve, you know you aren't supposed to wander off!" Zion turned back, facing the clearing where they last saw the child. "Tell me where you are right now, or I'm leaving without you!"

No answer was heard.

Empty threats aside, Zion began to stir around the area. They knew the marsh well. Eve couldn't have gone far, even if she wanted to. The marshland was vast but surely Zion would have heard her sneaking off. Either way, this knowledge didn't keep Zion's nerves from getting the best of them.

"You can't risk losing this one, Z," they told themself. "Pops has already lost so much, we've already lost so much. She has to be here somewhere."

In the midst of their search, Zion could have sworn they heard a soft fluttering from beyond. At first, they assumed it had been the swishing of the reeds in the wind; however, as they advanced care-fully through the thicket, the noise became persistent. Following it, Zion watched their step as they combed through the patches of sopping grass and soil in their midst. After all, the last thing Zion needed was to end up like many poor souls who slipped into the murky abyss of the marsh each year.

As the low, steady gust of sound rose, Zion felt something flutter past them. The small creature glided through the air with utmost grace and drive, floating towards where Zion believed to be the source of the mysterious noise. It was a butterfly.

Following after the insect, Zion push-ed back the bushels of reeds to confront the matter. Lo and behold, stooped down within the mud and grime as the whistling came to a close was Eve. The butterfly landed on the side of her face, inspecting her features curiously. There were others too. A small, yellow one perched on Eve's index finger while two more ventured along her right arm as if they staked their claim on the child. Like vultures to an abandoned corpse, the creatures wandered around Eve's body with edacious intent.

"I think they like me!" Eve finally responded, her tense features forming a deep, gaping smile as she spoke.

"How did you get down there?" Zion inquired.

"I was walking behind you like you asked but I saw one of these little flappy things on a reed," their

sister chimed. "I think I saw one in the books you gave me, but I never saw one for real before! Once I got down and played with it, more came. Aren't they pretty, Zion?"

Zion clicked their teeth in annoyance. To Eve's despair, they quickly shooed the insects away.

"What are you doing?!" Eve wailed.

Zion huffed, stooping down to their sister's level. "Keeping them off of you, obviously. They may look pretty but things like that will try to destroy you and we can't have that."

"B-But I didn't even get to know them," Eve whined, much quieter and sheepish than before.

For a moment, the two studied each other. Indeed, Eve knew she was different; she just couldn't figure out why Zion was so stern with her at times. Perhaps, it was a matter of control. Perhaps, it was a matter of resentment. Regardless, it didn't hide the glaring differences between her and her older sibling; not only in terms of their relationship, this circumstance was apparent physically as well. Eve have been a mere child mentally and spiritually, but physically she'd tower over most grown men. Instead of walking with a smooth stride, she often hobbled as she walked, seeing how one leg was slightly larger than the other. Moreover, she didn't have a rich, dark brown complexion like Zion. Hers was rough and tight; oftentimes it felt and looked like leather. Once, Eve found her-self fixating on her sibling's left hand, now swathed with a thick gauze. All she wanted to do at the time was hold their hand as she followed behind, only for her abnormal grip to break it with ease. It didn't take much to see that something was off. She didn't need her family's unsettled looks and enigmatic ways to know it.

Or, at least that's what she thought.

"Eve, I didn't mean to ruin your fun," started Zion, "but you know how important this trip is. Not just for Pops but for you too. I need you to stay on task."

They shrunk back as the child glanced in their direction. Despite their personal discretions, Zion pitied their sister and her unwitting innocence.

"Can you do that for me? Can you follow me and pay close attention to where you are?"

"...Yes."

"Okay, good."

Zion extended their hand to Eve, helping her up from her muddied perch. "And if you must know, they're called butterflies."

"Bu-butterflies?"

"Butterflies."

"I like butterflies!"

. . .

Nearly twenty minutes had passed since Zion found Eve. Any minute now, the two should arrive at the spot; despite their reluctance towards their mission, some-thing within Zion almost felt relieved by this course of action. Pops had done his part. All that was left was for the child to know the truth.

They swallowed hard, surveying the area for the proper place to lead Eve. On one hand, this was for the greater good of their sister. On the other hand, standing in the place where she once stood formed knots in Zion's stomach. They wanted to turn around and leave. They wanted to call the whole thing off, then lie to Pops about doing as he wished. Before they could consider these possibilities, Zion's thoughts were interrupted by a familiar scene; just ahead, they spotted a gnarled, winding willow tree protruding from the murky depths of the marsh. It was just as Pops described, much to Zion's dismay. Nonetheless, they had made it this far. It was only right to go through with their task.

"Eve, follow me to this side of the marsh," Zion ordered in a half-hearted tone. "This is what I've been meaning to show you."

The child followed, hobbling after Zion to the mysterious waters. Oddly enough, the scene was familiar to her as well. As she reached the edge of the wetland, Eve kneeled over to inspect the pools below. The water there was much clearer than anywhere else within the marsh. Every essence of her being could be seen, and it filled her with wonder. All across her face, various patches of skin were conjoined; each stitched section was a different

shade of brown, whether dark-skinned or light-skinned. Her eye sockets were no longer the sunken, bottomless black pits she's known them to be; thanks to the sunlight caught within the waters, Eve could faintly see what appeared to be eyes–real eyes. Two soft, deep-set windows had peered back at her; she couldn't be happier at the revelation. As the child continued to explore her visage, she made many exciting discoveries, such as the strange substance crusting under-neath her stitches: dried, clotted blood. It was astounding.

To the outside world, she would be considered a gory, unfathomable thing. Some would go as far as labeling her "unholy."

To Eve, she was special. She didn't look like the pretty little girls in Zion's old storybooks but this was who she was. There was no denying it, so why fight it? Why hate it?

To Zion, she was a painful reminder of a recent past.

"Look closer at the bog," instructed Zion. "What do you see?"

Following her sibling's word, Eve gazed harder at the waters. Looking past her reflection, what lay beyond it stirred her being. The bottom of the bog had revealed the final resting place of several misshapen figures. A few of which had long deteriorated, but a couple still harbored the same sunken, fleshy appearance as the peering child. Some had limbs were too long for their bodies, others were too short. Despite these inconsistencies, it didn't stop Eve from confronting feelings she never knew she had: fear and anguish.

Eve turned slowly towards Zion, her voice small and wavering. "Wha-what happened to them?"

"Them?" Zion replied. "You mean you?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you," Zion's eyes tore away from Eve, aiming at the bog. "Last summer, when you were alive...truly alive, you had wandered out to the marshes after dark. Pops and I told you not to wander off without either of us, but you were naive and headstrong. You wanted to take a swim out here by the willow tree

where we always met. But that night, you slipped into the deep end of the bog."

For a moment, the air was still.

Taking a deep breath in, Zion treaded carefully with their next few statements. "That night, we lost something special. We lost you, Eve. We searched and searched until Pops found you drifting in this bog; it broke him to see you so
lifeless. Blinded by his own twisted grief, he decided he would fix that. I don't know how he found the parts, let alone how he managed to contact and contain your spirit. Regardless, he did it. Time and time again, Pops created those amalgamations in order to bring you back; whenever he failed, he dumped them here...in your original resting place."

"These prototypes, I hated seeing you drift in and out of them," admitted Zion. "Living and dying, continuing that cycle one body after the next. Worst of all, it kept damaging your memory each time. I wanted you back as much as he did, but I wasn't sure if I wanted it like this."

Finished with their account, Zion glanced over at Eve. For once, they hadn't seen an eerie, tortuous reminder or an inhuman shell in her; what they saw was Eve, the real Eve. She stared back at Zion with somber understanding, and it tore them up inside. Zion knew that they would never understand her pain and confusion, but at least they could be with her long enough to share this truth.

Eve turned towards the abyssal depths once more. In a gentle, worrisome voice, she asked her companion one last question: "Zion...am I a monster?"

Zion raised their right hand, cupping Eve's face as they pondered on the right words. Once they found a response they were most comfortable with, Zion met Eve's eyes with an earnest gaze.

"No, you are my sister. Dead or alive, you will always be my sister."

Give Me Your Hand

Jessira Dunaway

Sunshower Sweet

Sunne King

From gardens untold flows the potion so
gently, glistening on my tongue–
So sweet the taste, so sweet the soul.
Honeycomb gold, brown sugar bronze,
How smooth is the nectar spilling forth
from your heart?
Even then, you are everlasting and ever-
glowing like the sun beaming above.
The muse of light loving, shining eternal,
The eye of Heaven's peak,
my sunshower sweet.

Cascading locs and glittering charms,
beauty embellished beyond measure.
A voice no blessed chorus can amount to,
dulcet is the tone caressing in the air,
tender is its song encompassing all.
An ode that is my home,
that is what I know.
Not a flood nor downpour
of any mythic scale could hope
to drown the gift that is you.

You, the light peering beyond morning skies and ceaseless fog,
like rays so gently streaming,
I kiss along your sable skin with burning fervor.
A feeling so saccharine,
a maddening treat,
The bud and dew sprouting before me,
only for you and for me,
my sunshower sweet.

Beach Trip

Jacob Trump

Spring Break

Jacob Trump

October's Gone

Dezarae Churchill

The sun begins to set over the
mountain tops
and there's a calm in the air that I
have never felt before,
A sense of peace I've never
experienced in this state.
The winding roads are home to what
created me, and he before I.
The fires fuel the homes and smoke
bellows from the chimney, staining
the fresh air.
The rust and cinder remind me of the
snowy roads in New York.
He would tend to the grill as I ran
through the woods chasing my
childhood wonder.

Throughout the years we have both
slowed down.
Humbled, and fighting a race against
the clock of life
Wondering if we have enough time,
and realizing we never will.
We are left with memory soaked
pillows and not nearly enough
photos.
The sun shines its final ray before the
moon so graciously takes its place in
the night sky.
The darkness welcomes our aching
hearts and provides falling stars to
comfort us,
A constant reminder that we are
never alone.

Fall, Spring, Summer, and Early Winter

Kyana Ayscue

Crowning

Sunne King

Bow your head, o' weary king.
Your kingdom spry and young,
Your rule absolute and singular,
And yet what tells of your heart?
It quakes not in fear of plots unaware,
But in fear of plots in which you are familiar.

The stones cast upon your very soul with spiteful fervor,
The daggers and swords piercing through your armor with vexing judgment,
You can feel it all.
You can foresee it all.
The eager, expecting court that resides in your presence,
The distant, frenzied rumble of war horses —
Their masters in tow, fastening themselves to your ruin.

Bow your head,
So that this precious crown may grace your temple,
Embellished with your prowess,
Bound together by your worth.
Seated at your throne and palace,
Know yourself.
Know your reign, o' mighty king.

Come what may.
In this life, you must grow into your mane,
Roam the unfettered lands surrounding you,
Seek a pride of your own if need be.
Let them come, o' mighty king.

Let them unsheathe their claws.
Let them snap their jaws and snarl.
Let the hyenas swarm.
As they approach with reckless abandon,
The roar of your very spirit will shake the earth before you.
They may swarm, they may snap at your frame,
But they shall never have you.

Your roar, your mane, your being —
It is yours to claim.
To rule and govern.
To fashion and wield.

Weathered time awaits you and your destiny.
Faces, whether friend or foe, look upon you
Expectant and wary.
Bow your head,
So that this precious crown my grace your temple,
Embellished with your prowess,
Bound together by your worth.
Seated at your throne and palace,
Know yourself.
Know your reign, o' mighty king.

To Be Me
Emmarose Boylan

Eventidings

Sunne King

On a moonless night in the sweeping
Southern summer heat,
I dreamt of black tigers with stripes of gold.
Brilliant streams of glory lined their bodies,
Curves and crevices for all to see.

Their mines of minds,
Where the rarest riches are reaped.
The paradise in their eyes,
Where brown pools of earth bare Edens anew.
The instrument of their souls,
Where the harps of Heaven strum
Their seamless, ascendant songs.

I implore you to find the tigers in the evening.

Country Roads

Tori Suhre

A flock of black birds wheeled overhead, then all at once disappeared behind the Blue Ridge Mountains. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel and took a deep breath. The morning sun slowly rose above the hills, painting an orange sky. You wouldn't normally expect it, but being a truck driver has its perks.

As I switched to the right lane, "Count-ry Roads" by John Denver began to play over the radio. I groaned and turned the volume down. I swore that was the fifth or sixth time they played "Country Roads" today.

"Folks in the Virginias love their god-damn country music," I mumbled to myself.

I leaned back in my seat and took a quick glance at each of the cars ahead of me. A blue Honda sped in the passing lane, and a white Jeep continually sped up and slowed down again in front of me. The license plate was from Alabama. I observed what cars I could from my sideview mirror. Dozens of cars were lined up a couple hundred feet behind my truck. Leading the line, a maroon Nissan sped up and almost hit the back of my truck. I honked my horn in frustration and yelled,

"Slow down you crazy bastard!" out the window. I couldn't get a good look at the driver, but I could tell he completely ignored me. He sped into the passing lane and got right on the Honda's tail. The Honda honked and the Nissan eased up on the gas. I huffed.

"Damn southerners trying to kill everybody—"

I checked my speedometer and made sure I wasn't a speeding hypocrite.

Cruising steadily along the right lane, I took a nice whiff of the fresh mountain air. There was a hint of pure gasoline. The view from those highways was insane. Tree-covered hills as far as the eye could see. A distant fog obscured half the scene, which was just my luck. Nothing like an early morning fog to make a mountain trek half its worth.

I glanced at my rearview mirror again. Checking my blindspots was always a chore. A different Honda was gaining on me, and fast. I brushed it off at first. Surely this man wasn't planning on ramming the back of my semi. But as he came closer and closer, to the point where I couldn't spot him, I put on the gas.

Just a moment after, some maniac swerved into my lane and was just a few feet in front of my grill. I slammed my break and honked like a madman, swearing as I went.

"The hell you think you're doing?" I shouted. The driver ignored me, just like the last.

"How do they get away with this shit?" I slammed my fist on the wheel. I figured getting mad wouldn't help. After all, angry driving is worse than drunk driving in my book. I turned the radio back up, "Country Roads" would be over by now. After browsing some stations that consisted of static and more country music, I settled on a newscast.

"Traffic report, Semi-truck wreckage a quarter mile from exit 79."

I turned the radio back down.

"Let's hope they don't block the highway by the time I get there," I thought to myself, attempting to shrug off the slight anxiety I had about getting into an accident. With all the reckless drivers around me, I just might have.

Out of nowhere, a blue Toyota swerved into the lane beside me. He had to have hit my truck along the way. He was way too close. I didn't feel anything hit me though. I blasted my horn and shouted at him,

"Watch where you're going, dickhead! You almost hit me!"

The driver, a prompt-looking man with glasses and waxed hair, kept his eyes focused on the road ahead. I honked at him again. There was no reaction.

I waved my arm outside my window trying to get his attention. I couldn't hear any music inside his car. There was no way this guy was just ignoring me.

To distract myself from my oncoming stress and headache, I

turned the radio back up and switched it to a music channel. Once again, "Country Roads."

"All my memories gather 'round her. Miner's lady, stranger to blue water..."

I couldn't help but mumble some of the words. It was catchy, but annoyingly so. It was stuck in my head anyway, so I might as well listen to it again.

For the next several minutes I cruised along the highway, drumming my wheel to the beat of "Country Roads." Along the way I enjoyed the scenic landscape as much as I could. The morning fog had passed, and the sun was now high. It was a lot to take in, miles and miles of woodland hills and clear blue skies. I figured I wouldn't be lucky enough to spot an eagle, but I could've sworn I saw one fly overhead at some point. I wasn't a bird expert though.

A few minutes later, after subconsciously singing along to the radio, "Country Roads" played again.

"Again!? Do they just have this thing on repeat?"

I shut the radio off altogether and drove the next few minutes in total silence. Eventually I began to near the site of the accident. I sensed traffic was slowing down, but everyone was still moving, which kept my hopes up.

As I neared exit 79, I kept my eye out for the wreckage. At first I saw nothing. Did they already clean it up? Traffic was still fine. If they had blocked the road I would have hit the backlog by now.

After a couple moments of curiously searching, I finally spotted the wreck. The truck was tipped over on its side, slumped into a ditch just off the highway. I shook my head.

"Damn shame."

I drove closer, about to make a silent prayer as I passed.

"Wait a minute..."

I was only two hundred feet away from the wreck when I saw it.

"That's my truck."

I got closer, close enough to see the backend of the semi. There was my license plate, clear as day.

"What in the hell—"

I slowed down a couple miles and scanned the wreckage as quickly as I

could. Among the smoke, smashed glass, and a broken door, I saw myself hunched over the wheel with blood, dripping from my lifeless hand, and a gaping cut splitting through the center of my forehead.

The truck's radio was still turned on. It was faint but I listened closely as I drove by—

"And driving down the road I get a feeling that I should have been home yesterday. Yesterday..."

I couldn't breathe. I clutched my steering wheel and veered onto the left lane, going through multiple cars as I went. I blasted my horn. I swerved back and forth between lanes. Nothing was happening.

No one could see me.

I slammed on my breaks, the sound of screeching tires pierced my eardrums. Cars drove through the tractor—through my legs and chest.

My words were stolen from me as well as any and all thoughts in my head.

I shut my eyes and swore never to open them again.

A flock of black birds wheeled overhead, then all at once disappeared behind the Blue Ridge Mountains. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel and took a deep breath. The sun settled high in the afternoon sky. You wouldn't normally expect it, but being a truck driver has its perks...

Zen Succulents

Michelle Porizkova